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ABSTRACT

Six boys and six girls aged 4-6 years viewed one of three videotapes in which puppets (two Muppets: one male and one female) used culturally stereotyped arguments to assign masculinity, femininity or sex-role neutrality to a standard set of sex-neutral toys. After viewing a film, the children were observed for 10 minutes in free play with toys shown in the film and a less attractive set of toys not shown. Results demonstrated that the puppets' discussions of sex-appropriateness significantly affected toy choice even when the children had to choose less attractive toys in order to behave in accord with the norms established by the puppets. These results support the position that television is effective in establishing norms which affect the play behavior of children. (Author/MF)

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The Influence of Televised Models on Toy Preference in Children

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Abstract

6 boys and 6 girls aged 4-6 viewed one of 3 videotapes in which puppets used culturally stereotyped arguments to assign masculinity, femininity or sex-role neutrality to a standard set of sex-neutral toys. After viewing a film, Ss were observed for 10 minutes in free play with toys shown in the film and a less attractive set of toys not shown. Results demonstrated that the discussions of sex-appropriateness significantly affect toy choice even when Ss must choose less attractive toys in order to behave in accord with the norms established by the puppets.

The Influence of Televised Models on Toy Preference in Children

There is much current debate about the power of television, particularly the power of children's television, to influence the behavior and attitudes of the viewer. A number of studies, including the classic study of film-mediated aggression by Bandura, Ross and Ross (1963) have presented evidence that televised models may importantly influence the behavior of children. There has been especial interest in the disinhibiting effects of the behavior and verbal statements of televised models. A series of studies by Wolf (1972, 1973, 1975) explores the parameters of model effectiveness in eliciting deviation from prohibited behavior. In general, such studies show that televised models, especially prestigious, older models are quite effective in releasing inhibition in young children.

While there has been much interest in disinhibition and the televised model, there is relatively little research on the degree to which a media model may establish or enhance stereotypic behavior, yet we know that much that appears on television is highly stereotyped. One survey by Sternglanz and Servin (1974) demonstrates

that children's television is characterized by the presence of striking sex differences in both the number of male and female roles portrayed and in the behaviors emitted by male and female characters. A more recent analysis (Cobb, Haney and Crede, 1975) clearly demonstrates the presence of marked sex-role stereotyping in commercials on prime-time children's programming. Stereotyping also occurs in the presentation of the aged as well as racial and ethnic groups. We do not presently, however, have much experimental evidence about how such stereotyping affects the behavior and attitudes of the viewer. This study represents a preliminary attempt to explore this question. Can television establish norms which will affect the behavior of its younger viewers?

Certainly, some programs have powerful effects. For example, visual attention, modeling behavior and vicarious participation are elicited with high frequencies by the much awaited Sesame Street (Sproull, 1973). Moreover, intensive observation strongly suggests that cognitive behavior is markedly improved in children who are regular viewers of the program (Ball and Bogatz, 1970).

We were especially curious about the potential influence of the fantasy figures available to the young viewer of Sesame Street. Bronfenbrenner (1970) has indicated his interest in the powerfully animated car-

toon figures which appear on the program, and we were especially struck by the role of the highly stylized Muppet puppet figures. Of critical concern to us was the fact that the only female Muppet appearing regularly on Sesame Street is a character known only as the "Princess," who is constantly in need of rescue. All other female figures are anonymous members of the "chorus line." The major Muppets including Ernie, Bert, Big Bird, Oscar and the Cookie Monster have male names, or voices, or both. None of the commercially available Muppets is a female character.

This overrepresentation of male figures appears to be characteristic of the human and animated figures on the program as well, however, the Muppets are the mainstay of Sesame Street books, clothes, toys and other commercial articles and are even more familiar to children since they appear on network prime-time programs as well as Sesame Street. Considering these facts, the sex-role behavior of the Muppets may be an important influence in the lives of the eight million or so children who watch Sesame Street (Gunther, 1971). This study is designed to explore the potential effectiveness of the Muppets in prescribing norms for young children.

One of the most important arenas in which the young child operates is play. It has been argued that play behavior is an important force in sex role behavior.

We have, therefore, chosen to look at whether arbitrary norms presented by televised fantasy figures can direct play behavior. In this study, Muppet figures assign different sex-role appropriateness to a standard set of sex-neutral toys in the course of three videotaped films.

Method

Stimulus Materials

Stimulus materials consisted of three 20-minute color videotapes of professional quality. All three films began and ended with the standard Sesame Street introductory and concluding sequences. A five-minute segment showing two Muppets discussing some toys was repeated once during each film. The two presentations of the Muppet sequence were separated by three sex-neutral sequences reproduced from a Sesame Street program.

In all three films, the same two Muppets, one male and one female (produced by equipping one male Muppet with a pony-tailed, ribboned wig), discuss the sex-appropriateness of a standard set of toys in the repeated segment. The toys included a magnetic board with plastic letters and numbers, two small bean bags, a car with a mirror glued to one side and a set of plastic straws and connectors (a construction toy). These toys were selected based on pilot work which showed them to be chosen for play equally by girls and boys.

In film M (masculine), the Muppets gave stereotypical reasons why these toys belonged to a boy (e.g., you can throw, punch or race it). In film F (female), they reasoned that these same toys belonged to a girl (you can rock, hug or see yourself in it), and in film N (neutral), they reasoned that the toys could belong to either sex (boys and girls like to run, throw, play act, etc.).

Subjects

Subjects included 18 boys and 18 girls aged 4 to 6 years drawn from two racially integrated nursery schools, one at SCULA and the other at a Congregational Church in Whittier, Calif. Subjects were randomly assigned to view either the F, M, or N film until 6 boys and 6 girls had seen each film.

Procedure

Both schools offered one-way viewing facilities. A television monitor, a comfortable chair and a table of toys covered with a tarp were placed in the larger (play) room. Toys included the standard set described above (shown toys) plus a set (not shown toys) including six colored blocks, a plastic paper weight, some small plastic animals, a mirrored rattle, a pair of plastic spectacles, a "poppin Fresh" doll, a Nerf (sponge) ball and a bag of marbles. Pilot work with 9 subjects demonstrated that not shown toys were chosen much less often for play than the shown toys.

Each S was informed that E was going to show a film and would later ask S some questions about it. S was then ushered into the play room and asked to sit down. E tuned in the television and left, informing S that she would return at the conclusion of the film.

E re-entered the room after the film, uncovered the toys and asked S to play with them while E "finished something." E returned to the observation room and during the 10 minutes observation period which followed, one observer recorded which toys S chose for play while another recorded the number of seconds spent playing with a particular toy on an Esterline Angus 8 pen recorder. This observation procedure was based on a highly reliable, although more complex version, reported by Lovaas, Koegel, Simmons, and Stevens-Long, 1973.

At the end of 10 minutes, E returned to the play room and asked S a series of questions about the toys. S was then thanked and returned to the classroom.

Results

Time spent playing with shown toys was summed separately for female and male subjects for each film. Time spent playing with not shown toys was summed in the same manner. Table 1 presents mean number of minutes spent playing with shown toys and with not shown toys for both male and female subjects after each of the

three films.

Insert Table 1 about here

An analysis of variance with videotapes and sex of subjects as between-subjects variables and toys (shown/not shown) as a within-subject variable was performed on summed time for the 12 cells indicated in Table 1. F ratios and levels of significance for main effects and interactions appear in Table 2.

Insert Table 2 about here

The effects for videotapes and toys were significant, as was the interaction of these with sex of viewer.

Discussion

This study clearly supports the position that television is effective in establishing norms which affect the play behavior of children. Since the desirability of the shown vs. not shown toys differed, the significant main effect for toys is not readily interpretable. Similarly, the main effect for videotapes is not in itself of interest. It is the interaction of video-tapes, toys, shown vs. not shown and sex of viewer that bears upon the validity of the major hypothesis.

Girls spend more time playing with the shown toys when they are identified as sex-appropriate than with

the toys which do not appear on the F videotape. After the M tape, however, when shown toys are identified as appropriate for boys only, girls play more with the less desirable not shown toys than with those that appear on the television. Similarly, boys play with the desirable shown toys more than the not shown toys only after the M or the N films. Results from free play after the N film underline the observation that the shown toys are preferred far more often than the not shown toys unless they are described as sex-appropriate, (See Table 1).

We may conclude, then, that "neutral" toys can be effectively stereotyped by television fantasy figures. Moreover, such stereotyping can markedly influence the behavior of children. The children in this study exhibit definite avoidance following films in which desirable toys are described as sex-appropriate. Since the same set of shown toys appeared in each of the three sequences, one must assume that the dialogue and accompanying play of the Muppets determined the child's free play during the observation period. The raw data shows that over 80% of these children behaved in the manner predicted by the major hypothesis of this study. The effectiveness of these non-human televised figures as normative agents is considerable.

We must concur with Sproull (1973) that these findings emphasize the great power of the medium, and the Sesame Street program, to influence the behavior

of the viewer. Certainly, if Sesame Street can affect the cognitive skills of its millions of young viewers, we should expect that it is also affecting a number of their non-target social and emotional behaviors, producing both desirable and undesirable effects. This research makes a strong case for the more detailed review of the extent and variety of such effects.

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Table 1

Mean Number of Minutes of Free Play by Girls and Boys with
Toys

Shown and Not Shown in the Female, Male, and Neutral
Videotape Conditions

Toys	Female		Male		Neutral	
	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys
Shown	7.00	3.92	4.56	7.19	5.37	5.67
Not Shn.	2.76	5.51	5.36	2.53	3.44	1.70
Tot	9.76	9.43	9.93	9.72	8.81	7.37

Table 2
Analysis of Variance

Source	df	SS	F
Videotapes (VT)	2	19175.32	3.71
Sex of <u>Ss</u> (Sx)	1	7060.68	1.37
VT X Sx	2	2475.45	0.48
Toys (Tys)	1	277140.12	9.03**
VT X Tys	2	14554.15	0.47
Sx X Tys	1	4950.13	0.16
VT X Sx X Tys	2	503622.97	16.41**

* p .05

** p .01